

# An Exploration and Analysis of Conceptual Engineering in the Philosophy of Language

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## Abstract

The main research methodology of the philosophy of language is conceptual investigation and its main task is to clarify or disambiguate concepts. Undoubtedly, this is a basic consensus in the circles of the philosophy of language. However, with the development of the discipline, people have realized that the research of the philosophy of language should not stop at conceptual clarification or disambiguation, but it should tinker with or replace concepts and when necessary, create new concepts. These are the new developments in the philosophy of language. Central to these developments is the research of conceptual engineering. What exactly is conceptual engineering? What practical values does it have? Centering around these questions, this paper presents an exploration of conceptual engineering itself with a view of revealing its essence and analyzing its practical implications. The basic tasks of conceptual engineering include conceptual design, implementation and evaluation. The practical value of conceptual engineering is that it pushes conceptual clarification or disambiguation toward conceptual construction.

## Keywords

Philosophy of Language, Conceptual Engineering, Conceptual Investigation, Linguistic Analysis

## 1. Introduction

A “linguistic turn” in philosophy occurred at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The modern philosophy of language mainly focuses on the task of linguistic analysis using conceptual examination as a central methodology. It mainly refers to the fact that Western philosophers, especially Anglo-American philosophers, paid special attention to language and attempted to solve philosophical problems by analysing language and accomplishing the tasks that philosophy should have

accomplished, and then philosophy took a turn. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anglo-American philosophers focused on the problem of language in philosophical research, and set off the analytical movement, which resulted in the formation of a number of philosophical schools, and led to the great development of philosophy of language and also led to the development of the subject.

With the development of philosophy, people have realized that the existing concepts are far from perfect. Some philosophers of language began to claim that “philosophy is, for the most part, the study of inconsistent concepts and flawed concepts.” (Scharp, 2013: p. 3) After all, the use of concepts is unavoidable in whatever cognitive activities we pursue. The selection of, as well as changes in, concepts has a pervasive and profound impact on cognitive activities. Hence, it is crucial to use correct and constructive concepts, instead of being content with the clarification and disambiguation of current concepts.

Although the term conceptual engineering emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conceptual engineering projects themselves are nothing new to philosophy. In Western philosophy, there has burst forth a renaissance of literature on conceptual engineering while few explorations have been made and little attention has been given to this field. Then, what exactly is conceptual engineering? What practical values does it have? Centering around these basic questions, this paper aims to present a preliminary exploration of conceptual engineering.

## 2. Literature Review

The origin of conceptual engineering: The term conceptual engineering originated from *Dear Carnap, Dear Van* published by Creath, who claimed that “philosophy is a form of conceptual engineering (Creath, 1991: p. 31).” Blackburn said, “I would prefer to introduce myself as doing conceptual engineering. Just as the engineer studies the structure of material things, the philosopher studies the structure of thought... We may end up proud of the structures we have built. Or we may believe that they need dismantling and starting afresh.” (Blackburn, 1999: pp. 1-3) Blackburn’s likening of philosophers to engineers has inspired many later scholars. Brandom (2002) hailed the work done by Dretske, Fodor and Millikan as a paradigm of conceptual engineering and Leibniz, Spinoza and Hegel as conceptual engineers. Other usages of the term can be found in Eklund’s application of the conceptual engineering label. Using “truth” as an example, he described conceptual engineering as “the research of which truth concept should be employed in certain theoretical contexts and what characteristics the concept has” (Eklund, 2015: p. 376).

The conceptual engineering projects themselves have also exhibited multi-field, multi-theme and multi-objective characteristics. Under different topics in the philosophy of language, including semantics, logic, pragmatics, sociology, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, etc. The existence of the projects of conceptual engineering within and without the philosophical arena, the projects of conceptual engineering referred to by semantic and psychological theorists

and the conceptual engineering projects with theoretical and practical objectives causes difficulty in terminological definition. The definition of the term has been a matter of disagreement and controversy and no consensus has been reached in the academic circles. Nor is there a consensus on terminological selection. Haslanger (2000, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2012) proposed the ameliorative analysis strategy and later used the term “ameliorative project” in discussions of conceptual engineering with a practical objective, with a view of promoting social emancipation. Scharp (2007, 2013) applied the term “revisionary project” in the ex-parte discussion of the theoretical objectives of what some theorists should do in specific theoretical contexts instead of focusing on practical objectives. Conceptual ethics is a label preferred by Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b), who explored conceptual normalization and assessment problems, that is, what concepts should be used to better serve relevant rational objectives, and argued that conceptual ethics affects the objectives that we can achieve in real life. Cappelen utilized the conceptual engineering label to argue that “the objective of conceptual engineering is to change the connotations and extensions of language expressions (Cappelen, 2018: p. 61)”. In the same vein, Cappelen has not given much consideration to whether conceptual engineering can adequately serve as an effective device for practical objectives. Some other scholars used Rudolf Carnap’s term “explication” to denote the sub-version of conceptual engineering projects. Similarly, Koch also adopted the label “conceptual engineering” to describe conceptual engineering as “the activity (or a method) of changing what certain words or expressions mean in a language” (Koch, 2020: 1957; Manuel Gustavo, 2021: 2053).

Terminological development: Conceptual engineering projects, in their own right, are nothing new in the development course of philosophy, where philosophers constantly, to some extent, critically assess concepts, tinker with existing concepts and propose their own specialized concepts. Such a process has run through, consciously or unconsciously, the history philosophy. As long as one realizes that our concepts are not perfect in some ways or on some dimensions, conceptual engineering will emerge. For example, many of our existing concepts are inexact or even ambitious. Similar flaws have inspired not only Carnap’s explication but also other “ideal language” approaches found by earlier practitioners of analytic philosophy. “Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* is a paradigm of conceptual engineering,” (Cappelen, 2018: p. 25) which aims to provide an improved language, and later philosophers like Russell, Searle and Kripke all proposed relevant tinkering solutions.

Carnap, Quine and Gupta all emphasized “explication”. Carnap characterized explication as “the transformation of an inexact, prescientific concept, the explicandum, into a new exact concept, the explicatum.” (Carnap, 1950: p. 3) Quine stressed “a focus on unclear expressions of specific functions...and the design of alternatives to satisfy such functions (Quine, 1960: pp. 258-259).” While the explication claimed by Gupta (2015) aims to respect some central uses of a

term but is stipulative on others, it may be offered as an absolute improvement of an existing, imperfect concept, or, it may be offered as a “good thing to mean” by the term in a specific context for a particular purpose.

Wittgenstein claimed that the aim of philosophy is “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (Wittgenstein, 2020: 148; PI 309). Therefore, the objective of philosophy is a therapeutic method to alleviate the disturbed situation due to a lack of understanding of language use. To some extent, Chalmers (2011) explained the conceptual engineering vision, that is, the disputes arising from conceptual inconsistency make philosophy pointless and a waste of time, and thus there is a pressing need to assess and improve concepts.

Inspired by Haslanger’s “ameliorative analysis”, Cappelen focused on conceptual tinkering to officially explore conceptual engineering as a meaningful theme in the philosophy of language. Conceptual engineering is the enterprise of evaluating and improving our defective representational devices (Cappelen, 2018: p. 3). Ever since then, research of conceptual engineering has entered academic circles as a systematic and specialized field.

The conceptual engineering projects themselves have accompanied the development of philosophy. However, its novelty lies in the endeavor to systematically research conceptual engineering projects and make them more systematic through what we do, thereby advancing conceptual clarification and disambiguation toward the construction of concepts. However, it is not hard to find that conceptual engineering still has many inconsistencies and problems in terminology definition, development and usage that require further exploration. To address the terminological selection problem, we prefer conceptual engineering as explained below.

### 3. The Extension and Intension of Conceptual Engineering

Although “conceptual engineering” is just a new methodology in the philosophy of language, the concept itself highlights the systematicity of the research in the philosophy of language. What are the extension and intension of conceptual engineering from the perspective of conceptual integrity?

The core of conceptual engineering consists of engineering and concepts. The so-called engineering, etymologically speaking, refers to the materialistic objects of design, construction and evaluation, that is, a series of design, construction and assessment activities on materialistic objects in accordance with relevant knowledge and principles in order to improve the human life. The engineering that we are familiar with involves (typically) road, water conservancy, greening and genetic projects. These metaphorical expressions help us understand specific engineering projects and that they share a commonality as projects. Such a commonality, as a reference that we are familiar with, guides us to derive concepts of unfamiliar things.

In the face of unfamiliar abstract concepts, we tend to understand them by starting with familiar experiences and leveraging known things and phenomena.

Scientists use existing terms to discuss new discoveries and metaphors to express scientific concepts beyond ordinary life experience. In biology class, teachers liken the operation mechanism of cells to task assignments in the factory to facilitate students' understanding.

“Metaphorization is to mirror, shape and form concepts with reference to some pre-existing structure.” (Chen, 2003: p. 372) Drawing on the concept of engineering, the experience of conceptual engineering acquires an explicit form and its concept can be derived so that we can understand and discuss it.

### 3.1. The Concept of “Engineering”

Engineering activities must share a common “core” to generate engineering projects in so many different types that have certain common qualities. Engineering is a practical activity with a long history; where there are humans, there is engineering. According to some research, the term “engineering” first appeared during the Southern and Northern Dynasties in China, which mainly referred to civil engineering. As recorded by *The Winter Official, Code Book of Works, The Rites of Zhou*, “wise men can make objects, ingenious people follow the wise men’s ways, and those who kept this as an occupation were called gong (craftsmen). Utensils or tools made by hundreds of craftsmen are saint’s creations”. This illustrates a scene where wise men design objects while skilled individuals make them based on the design. According to the *Biography of Dongfang Shuo, Book of Han*, “as soon as Emperor Wu recruited distinguished individuals, he would assessment (cheng) their talents...”. Engineering, which is the combination of “gong” and “cheng” in Chinese, means to produce objects according to certain rules and ideas. Hence, the main part of engineering activities is the design, construction and assessment of materialistic objects. In English, “engineering” is the compound of “engine” and “ingenious” with the latter derived from the Latin word “ingenenerare” (which means “creation”). In Wikipedia, engineering is defined as the practice of using scientific, economic, social and practical knowledge to design, build, assess and maintain structures, mechanics, equipment, systems, materials and programs.

### 3.2. Conceptual Engineering

With the etymological exploration in Chinese and English, the definition and structure of “engineering” can be clarified. Borrowing the notion of “gestalt” in *Metaphors We Live By* by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), engineering is a structurally intact gestalt. We can derive the concept of conceptual engineering according to the gestalt based on the idea that objects that are generally similar mean their gestalts are similar. Then, conceptual engineering is similar to the thought structural process of design, construction and assessment, which is consistent with Blackburn’s idea. As such, we can say that conceptual engineering includes designing, implementing and assessing concepts. Before discussing conceptual engineering further, some resonant cases might help our understanding.

Frege asserts that our everyday language is defective as it blurs our thoughts. To think clearly, we must replace it with improved language. Frege's critical and constructive approach provides philosophers with a powerful tool to break the confinement of thought by words. He designed the concept of "sense" as an innovation aimed at improvement. Indeed, this project also involves Carnap's "intention", Grice's "implicature" and Kripke's "rigid designator".

Carnap's "explication" aims at improvement tinkering. The basic idea is to replace the "explicandum" with "explicatum", thereby replacing "everyday concepts" with "scientific concepts", that is, a process of replacing imprecise pre-scientific concepts with precise new ones. Carnap says, "The task of making more exact a vague or not quite exact concept used in everyday life or in an earlier stage of scientific or logical development, or rather of replacing it by a newly constructed, more exact concept, belongs among the most important tasks of logical analysis and logical construction. We call this the task of explicating, or of giving an explication for, the earlier concept; this earlier concept, or sometimes the term used for it, is called the explicandum; and the new concept, or its term, is called an explicatum of the old one". (Carnap, 1947: pp. 7-8)

As a paradigm of conceptual engineering, Haslanger (2000, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2012) did some conceptual work related to gender and race. Specifically, in a paper titled *Gender and Race: What Are They? What Do We Want Them to Be?*, he proposed the provoking strategy of "ameliorative analysis". As such, conceptual engineering elicited extensive discussion as a concept construction. Oriented towards the practical goals, the strategy requires us to stay alert about the conceptual devices we currently have and cautiously assess whether they are effective goals to achieve our (legitimate) objectives; if not, we should find concepts that better meet these objectives, that is, the target concepts. The concept of "woman" can be replaced by a concept that expresses a similar secondary, subordinate position of women based on stereotypes. The replaced concept is used to externalize the meaning of oppression, thereby contributing to the combat against such oppression and providing a new concept that serves the goals of social justice. Despite its difference from the goal of replacing the "truth" concept in the conceptual engineering proposed by Scharp, the two cases share a consistent approach.

Du Shihong distinguishes the dynamic discursive phenomenon in everyday discourse communication that is distinct from punning and calls it "homophone switching". Using association theory, he conducted a detailed conceptual diagnosis, finding a duality of association characteristics of homophone switching: the superficial phonological association and the substantive contextual transformation (Du, 2003). The similar "punning" concept is distinguished, and in the meantime, the new concept is defined as follows: Homophone switching refers to the discursive phenomenon by which the communicator intentionally uses a sound to express another meaning and switch from one context to another during the process of discursive communication; the discourse initiator intentionally and purposefully exploits the phonetics of certain discursive fragments

during the encoding and decoding processes and switches to phonetically identical or similar discursive components that may surprise the recipient, thereby diverting the attention of both communicators and serving a specific communicative purpose.” (Du, 2003) The process of designing the new concept of “homophone switching” is also a type of conceptual engineering.

The above cases adequately reveal the principle of conceptual engineering and the design, implementation and assessment activities it entails. As the three basic activities of conceptual engineering, design mainly involves introducing new concepts and terms; implementation focuses on utilization; and assessment focuses more on diagnosis and value assessment. It should be noted that conceptual engineering is not synonymous with the combination of the three activities or all instances of them. Instead, each activity can go on independently as a separate case of conceptual engineering. After a preliminary understanding of conceptual engineering, we will continue with the terminology selection problem mentioned earlier. Different labels have been used in different forms on different dimensions by scholars against different backgrounds, leading to a difficulty in terminology uniformity. Despite the existence of similarities and overlaps, there are indeed many differences across these projects. We prefer conceptual engineering because compared with other labels like conceptual ethics, conceptual engineering is more closely associated with the innovation and actual application of concepts in reference to the common core of engineering. With highlighted systematicity and integrity, it guides us towards the conceptualization of systematic construction.

### 3.3. Basic Types of Conceptual Engineering

The basic activities of conceptual engineering and the forms of their collaboration give rise to different conceptual engineering projects. Then, what are the basic types of conceptual engineering? In his work *The Will of Power*, Nietzsche asserts: “Philosophers...have trusted in concepts as completely as they have mistrusted the senses: they have not stopped to consider that concepts and words are our inheritance from ages in which thinking was very modest and unclear....What dawns on philosophers last of all: they must no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first make and create them, present them and make them convincing.” (Nietzsche (1901/68), Section 409)

This paragraph provides some clues and implications aligned with the conceptual engineering theme and introduces the core theme of conceptual engineering: apart from the concepts that we actually have and use, there are other concepts, some of which may be able to better serve different purposes than our practical concepts. Austin says, “...ordinary language is not the last word: in principle, it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded”. (Austin, 1957: p. 11) We should question existing concepts and consider whether there are better ones available. As long as there are better options, we should try to make a change so that they can better use them. Therefore, a phil-

osophical project that critically assesses, tinkers, supplements and innovates concepts has arisen, that is, conceptual engineering. Innovation and tinkering correspond to two important and distinct elements in conceptual engineering: conceptual innovation and conceptual tinkering. Hence, conceptual engineering should at least consist of conceptual creation engineering and conceptual tinkering engineering.

## 4. Actual Applications of Conceptual Engineering

The conceptual creation and tinkering projects usually work in two basic circumstances: First, defective concepts. The defects are reflected in multi-faceted forms which can either be internal defects or the external influences caused by the defects. Second, purpose-oriented. It can either be research starting with specific scholarly purposes carried out by specific theorists against corresponding theoretical backgrounds, which is reflected by innovation, enrichment and development, or efforts made for the purpose of achieving actual influences in practices. The following section discusses the real cases of these two types of conceptual engineering.

### 4.1. Cases of New Conceptual Engineering Project

A new conceptual engineering project, first and foremost, is an innovative activity and a design process of something from nothing. Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary zoologist, coined the concept of “meme”<sup>1</sup> in his work *The Selfish Gene*.

In the 19th century, Mendel found in his experiments that there was a separate and indivisible unit of heredity that stores the genetic information of life: the gene. However, “from an original point of view, there are at least two cognitive approaches towards people’s scientific understanding of things: First, scientific proof and theoretical calculations that lead us from known phenomena to unknown essences; second, the path of bold associations and careful analogies that lead us from the old known truths to the new unknown truths” (Du, 2005a). As such, Dawkins argues that the replicator underlying the Darwinian selection does not necessarily have to be DNA. On that basis, he isolated a second replicator named as “meme”.

The concept of genes no longer satisfied the need to describe a complete evolutionary landscape, while memes came to explain the evolutionary mechanism of culture from a Darwinian perspective (Nelson, 2007). “Meme” represents the creation of a new concept involving new naming and definition: “Memes are replicable basic units for cultural evolution and transmission... memes propagate in the meme pool by bounding from the brain to brain via an imitation process.” (Dawkins, 2006)

With promotions of various studies and expert advocacy, journals dedicated

<sup>1</sup>The term was translated by Du Shihong as “moyin” in Chinese. Du Shihong. A Journey to American Languages [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press. 2005.

to meme research were created and meme as a discipline was established (Du, 2005b). The process from the design of the meme concept to its actual utilization has been accompanied by value assessment. “This meme concept proposed by Dawkins is of equal importance to human beings as genes and represents a great leap in human’s understanding of themselves.” (Du, 2005b: p. 418) Meme as a valuable concept has become a part of the human concept repertoire.

#### **4.2. Case of Conceptual Re-Engineering**

Conceptual re-engineering projects focus on evaluation, tinkering and enrichment of concepts. Given the prevailing Darwinian panorama and the evolutionary need of the meme concept, and inspired by Dawkins’ view that evolution is not limited to biological genes, Susan Blackmore proposed the existence of a third replicator (the foundation of technologies) based on the “meme” concept—a brand new replication, change and selection that represent a new evolutionary process that is stored and processed by machines, which is named as “teme”.

Like the other six famous forms of life, technology is regarded as the seventh form of life that has the motivation to survive and evolve (Zhang & Nauman, 2020). Just as biological evolution relies on genes and cultural inheritance on meme, technological evolution relies on teme. There hitherto exist three “replicators”: the “genetic replicator”, “memetic replicator” and “temetic replicator” (Blackmore, 2010) (Du, 2012) respectively as the basic units of the transmission and inheritance of biological, cultural and technological information.

The teme concept represents an enrichment and extension of the gene and meme concepts, which is driven by the goal of conceptual assessment and serves to improve the concept repertoire with an improved concept. The proposition of teme is associated with socioeconomic development. With the development in physical and information technologies, the advent of the information era provoked people to continue their imaginations, on the basis of memes, about something that originates from the human brain but exists in physical forms or with the help of machines, such as massive digital information or systematic information of a certain area (Du, 2012). Today, teme has been applied in multiple areas like science and technology, literature and teaching. Building upon the concept, Du further proposed the “meme-based grammar teaching method” (Du, 2012) to incorporate meme and teme in grammar instructions.

#### **4.3. Conceptual Evaluation in Conceptual Engineering**

The philosophers of language focus on our actual concepts and what they represent in the world, which is quite necessary. However, this also involves certain risks, that is, it could unintentionally become a narrow cause. Concepts are used when we try to understand, explain and communicate things. Such an application pervades almost all cognitive activities. However, which concepts we use is of great importance to how we conduct certain activities. The conceptual engineering project relies upon the hypothesis that one meaning can be better than

another and could be improved. This means the concepts we have may not be the optimal ones for all relevant dimensions or purposes. Therefore, we are obliged to assess, improve and tinker with concepts, and when necessary, create new ones.

Of course, the ambition of conceptual engineering does not stop here. It is also committed to influencing and changing our realistic world and more practical goals. The meanings we have shape our various thoughts and actions in different ways. For example, improper use of generalizations can lead us to faulty reasoning and mindless bias; using the word “marriage” without including the meaning of same-sex partners may perpetuate discrimination against such a group of people. Burgess and Plunkett (2013a) argue that “one central motivation for conceptual ethics is that which concepts determine what we can think of”. Burgess and Plunkett (2013a) further assert that “our conceptual repertoire determines not only what beliefs we can have but also what hypotheses we can entertain, what desires we can form, what plans we can make on the basis of such mental states, and accordingly constrains what we can hope to accomplish in the world.” “Conceptual engineers (sometimes) aim to change how people think about objects, how they classify them, and how they use words”. (Koch, 2020: 1958)

Going back to Haslanger’s ameliorative project, it can be found that it allows every one of us to stand at the center of self-understanding and the change of terminologies requires us to rethink our understanding of ourselves. On the contrary, our social roles also help decide what individuals we can become and what things we can do. The concepts that we have affect our lives in diverse ways. Such an impact may be broad and far-reaching, which is also one of the important reasons that we should ensure the meanings we have are as good as possible and why conceptual engineering is so important.

## 5. Conclusion

As a new development in the philosophy of language, conceptual engineering upholds an active and critical attitude. It seeks new development by introducing new concepts. It critically reviews, tinkers with and replaces concepts. Although conceptual engineering is a new methodological topic, it has always been accompanying the development course of the philosophy of language and its novelty lies in the fact that conceptual engineering can become a systematic constructive project. As a metaphorical label, conceptual engineering upholds the common cores of the engineering concept involving activities of designing, implementing and assessing concepts. It entails two basic types: new conceptual engineering and conceptual re-engineering.

Needless to say, conceptual engineering inevitably invites doubts as it does not have a uniform and clear definition and is troubled with many challenges. It is problematic, to varied degrees, in terminological definition, development and application, and no definitive conclusions have been drawn in terms of termi-

nological selection, basic activities, classes and class distinguishing. Nevertheless, cases that are discussed under the conceptual engineering label share more or less some commonalities. Despite competing opinions and a lack of consensus, this paper argues that conceptual engineering is positive and necessary, and it should exist. Without systematic theories and methodologies in the philosophy of language, conceptual engineering may point out a constructive path of unification that pieces it to a complete map.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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